Weights and Measures **[1]**

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Weights and Measures

by David A. Norris, 2006

Among the responsibilities of the Church of England [2] parishes in early North Carolina was the purchase and maintenance of a set of sealed weights and measures as the standards for each county. This requirement was different from the law in England, where weights and measures were the responsibility of the justices of the peace [3] and their constables. In compliance with a law passed by the colonial Assembly in 1702, the vestry of St. Paul's Parish [4] in Chowan County [5] by 1703 had ordered a set of weights and measures from Boston to be kept by Edward Smithwick, a church warden.

A statute of 1715 [6] required the set of weights and measures to include "Five half hundreds, One Quarter of an Hundred, Four pounds Weight, Two pounds, One pound & two Half pound weights-A pair of Brass scales together with a Brass or Copper Yard and of measures an Half Bushel, Peck, Gallon, Pot, Pottle [half-gallon], Quart & pint." The "Eldest of the Church wardens . . . or other such person as shall be appointed by the vestry" was to keep the standards in his house. Anyone having weights, measures, or steelyards (a type of balance in which a weight was moved along an iron rod) not officially sealed in England was to take them to the warden to have them checked. Approved weights, measures, and steelyards were designated with the letters "N.C.," with the warden using a metal stamp, or a branding iron in the case of wooden measures (evidently the half bushel and peck containers).

Official weights and measures were considered an important protection for consumers. The colonial Assembly at various times passed laws to punish merchants and others who cheated buyers. The

1715 law fined offenders 20 shillings for each count of using weights, measures, or steelyards that were not officially stamped or sealed. In 1741 the law was changed so that the weights and measures would be provided by the justices of each county. The justices were to levy a tax to pay for them and appoint a Standard Keeper to take charge of them.

Laws protecting citizens from unscrupulous merchants continued to be energetically enforced throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A comprehensive clarification of these laws, the North Carolina Weights and Measures Act (Chapter 81-A of the North Carolina General Statutes [7]), was passed by the General Assembly [8] in 1975. The act is primarily enforced by the Standards Division of the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services [9], which tests the accuracy of all weighing and measuring devices and price-scanning systems used in the state. Violators receive stiff monetary penalties, which are then used to the benefit of the North Carolina public school system [10].

Additional Resources:

The State records of North Carolina, Laws of North Carolina- 1715. [6] By North Carolina, William Laurence Saunders, Stephen Beauregard Weeks, North Carolina. Trustees of the Public Libraries.

Weight and Measures Act, Chapter 81-A, 1975:
http://www.ncga.state.nc.us/EnactedLegislation/Statutes/HTML/BySection/Chapter_81A/GS_81A-1.html [7]

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